



## Denim: Traces of Life in Blue

By Eric Shaw

Denim is blue—like sea and sky.

It evokes the oceans and heavens.

Humans deeply love blue—probably because it conveys the transcendence of the high and the deep.



blue poison dart frog from  
the northeast of South  
America

Nature offers this tinge only rarely on land—[mostly, just some frogs, birds and beetles have it](#)—but surveys tell us blue is [humanity's favorite color](#).

And the big [transcendence-focused culture](#) of India is the earliest source our most celebrated blue dye—Indigo--and our most famous blue fabric--denim--too.

[Though “denim” is a colloquialism for \*di Nime\*,](#)

(literally, “from Nime”)—a fashionable term Brits used to glamorize a durable cloth made in Nimes, France—denim itself was first approximated by an [Indian fabric called \*dongri\*](#)—famed for making the sails on Columbus’ ships and the trousers that Indian, British, and U.S. sailors wore.

Eventually these pants were called “dungarees”—a term still used by fashionable pants makers today.



Azurite--A source of blue pigment for many paintings from the Middle Ages

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The geographical pedigree of the word “Indigo” also takes us to India. It comes from the Greek *indikos* meaning, “Indian dye.”

For centuries, indigo plants were the world’s surest source of blue coloring even as countless poor experiments with [snails, stones and plants](#) soldiered on, yielding weaker hues.

After the Brits and their navy crushed the French indigo trade in the 1700s, they made it a prime cash crop in all their tropical possessions (including the U.S. south).

A century and a half later, indigo-dyed American denim would establish a unique hold on the world’s imagination.

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Though denim milled in Nimes and Genoa (“jen-o-wa”--sourced for our word, “jeans”) maintained American market share, indigenous manufacture of the cloth [emerged as early as 1789](#).

That year, we read of President George Washington touring a new mill for denim in Massachusetts.

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The story is oft-told, but a Bavarian, [Leob Strauss \(who re-christened himself, “Levi”\)](#), shipped out to New York in 1848, then entrained over to gold-maddened San Francisco in 1853—where he launched our modern entrancement with denim’s blue a few decades later.

He linked up with a Latvian from Reno, named [Jacob W. Davis](#), who fashioned a “dungaree” using rivets and [cotton](#)



[duck](#) (what we'd call canvas), and they patented it together in 1873.

Contrary to popular understanding, [denim jeans weren't born then](#), but a tough, riveted pant, sewn from brown canvas, was.



Indigo-dyed denim first made its way into the celebrated “501” Levis in 1890—17 years later.

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Unfortunately, the oceans of blue dye made by India's planters had just a few years to pour their wonderful color toward these classic jeans.

Even as Strauss was pursuing a better pant, his German kinsman were pursuing better blues.

[By 1897, they could mass-manufacture blue as a chemical hue.](#)

In less than a decade, synthetic blues sank mass indigo farming—plunging it toward obscurity like a French schooner to a watery tomb.

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In a traditional weave, denim's blue warp threads (now stained synthetically) are diluted by a double-count of white weft threads.

When washed, the blue threads shade the white.

As most of us know, The fade-places we create in this complex cloth show a record of our activity over time.

Blue in denim pleases us. Its cotton comforts the skin, and its selective wear-spots record our slow dissolve toward transcendence.

Denim leaves traces in human history, and your life leaves traces in every piece of denim you wear.

